

The Capture of *Imperial Hazard*

By Nora Mayers; Illustrations by Christopher Trevas

Madame Mon Neela was not safe, not even in the security-tight bases from which she was being constantly relocated. The Rebels' continuous struggle to keep their leaders' locations hidden from the Empire was becoming as difficult as their attempts had been during the Great Purge to hide the Jedi Knights. Despite their best efforts during those dark times, the Knights had been all but extinguished.

The Rebels were determined that the same fate would not befall their experienced war strategists and leaders, or their cause was surely lost.

Mon Neela, a former assistant barrister general of the Old Republic, was among those at highest risk. She hardly seemed a militarist, with her lovely face and kind eyes. The face that had been beautiful in youth was still attractive, but it had mellowed by mid-life into softer, gentler lines. Judging her with only a glance, no one would ever have thought her a great leader. But when she spoke, her voice possessed such authority that those who listened followed.

Her political profile had always been high. In the Senate, when Senator Palpatine had begun to exceed the polite rules of the Council, she had protested. Now she was a strategist of the Rebel Command, her battle tactics were renowned, her dedication to the Rebel cause without question ... and Palpatine wanted her dead.

"We have a ship, Neela, but we haven't much time," explained the Bothan, Polo Se'lab, her Senate contemporary and now a general of the Rebellion. Urgently he thrust an atmospheric oxygen mask and a shoulder cloak into her hands. "These will conceal your identity until you're safely off Horob. Now that this world's natives know that the Empire has found us here, they are no longer friendly."

Neela made an impatient sound and pushed the disguise back into his hands. "I have no need of these. I'm staying! Listen to me! This base is made up of physicists and engineers, with a few soldiers to protect them. A band of barely protected scientists working on computer and droid sensors, Polo! There aren't enough troops here to withstand a full Imperial assault. The field commanders need me. Without me, they are unprepared for --"

"Neela!" Se'lab's upper lip curled in frustration. He drew a deep breath to regain control of his temper, and continued. "Don't make my tasks more difficult. The troops on this world are not alone in needing you. It seems unlikely we'll have time to evacuate before the Imperials arrive. If we are taken your experience will be needed on other worlds, other bases. We can't afford to lose you."

Neela's even expression didn't alter, her posture became no more or less rigid, but something undefinable signaled her even greater defiance. "My sons died for this Rebellion," she answered. "My own life has been dedicated to it, and yet I am continually being asked to run away. Not this time -- I will see *this* battle through."

Neela's guard, Stasheff -- a handsome young man, despite the habitual sternness of his expression -- stood a pace behind her. He could not see her face, but he watched Se'lab curiously, expecting to see him wilt beneath Neela's persuasive rhetoric.

But the Bothan was used to (and impervious to) Neela's oratory prowess. "What do you think, Madame?" he challenged. "That I make this request of you lightly? That what I do, I do out of disregard for this unit? If you are as concerned about it as you claim, then you'll leave now and let *me* try to save it. You can do no more here. Think again where your loyalties lie. Are they with the Alliance, or are they more self-serving than even you realize? Is it honor you seek now?"



Neela glared defiantly at her old comrade, then reluctantly glanced at the garments he again offered.

The Bothan gave a sigh of relief as she took them. "The natives are afraid; some threaten to fight against us when the Imperials come. Hysteria has brought things to this impasse, but it is not beyond repair. I'll redeem what I can."

Neela didn't look at him as she swirled the cape around her shoulders and donned the mask. "Fight for it then," she insisted. "We didn't struggle so hard and so long to see our goal shattered now. *Fight* for it!"

Se'lab extended his hands to Neela in the human gesture of friendship. As she accepted them, he slipped a data chip, no larger than a speck, into her palm.

She glanced in surprise at him, then turned the tiny chip between her finger tips. "This is the sensor under development here for--?"

"Yes." Se'lab closed her fingers around the chip, then covered her hands with his own. "It's all I have to send with you, and I'm afraid it isn't much. It's only experimental, but the scientists are very proud of its potential." He gave her an encouraging smile and released her hands, stepping back a pace.

"If you please, Madame," Stasheff urged, "we haven't much time."

"May the Force be with you," Se'lab said. "I'll do what I can."

As Neela and Stasheff emerged from the crumbling stone building that housed a medical clinic for the planet's poor (and only recently the clandestine operations of the Rebel Alliance), it seemed that a celebration was in progress. But it took only seconds to recognize the riotous commotion as far from jubilant. A contingent of the planet's natives, realizing that their city would soon be invaded by the Empire, were in violent turmoil. The Rebels had come offering a better future, and the Horobians had been willing to fight for it -- or so they claimed. But now the Empire was coming, and the idealistic Rebel words seemed more like a death sentence. Through the chants and shouts of the people, Neela recognized her name. They were shouting for her release -- calling for her to be given to the Empire in atonement for their own treason.

Stasheff hurried Neela around the side of the dilapidated building and rushed her into a waiting airspeeder.

The roar of the engines drowned out the sound of the crowd; as the small craft became airborne, Neela slumped against the seat. Until the moment Se'lab insisted she leave, she'd desperately hoped for this particular unit. There weren't many soldiers on Horob. The best ground troops and X-wing pilots were situated where the fighting was heaviest and the threats most severe. By comparison, the troops protecting the base scientists on Horob were few, but they were among the bravest she'd encountered. Now when she closed her eyes, she saw their young idealistic faces and despaired at how many would be lost when the Imperials arrived.

Bitter tears stung her eyes and she allowed herself private grief. The Rebellion had become her existence; any chance she might have had for normalcy had been swallowed up in her fervent desire to see the Empire overthrown and the Republic restored. Now she wondered if she had been tragically idealistic.

Stasheff piloted in silence, his attention riveted on the flight path and surveillance instruments that would alert him if they were being followed. But despite the nervousness that prickled his spine, he knew they were not being tracked. The Imperials were hours away, and the Horobians -- still at the beginnings of industrialization -- hadn't yet developed transportation beyond primitive ground cars.

After a short time Stasheff set the airspeeder down on an empty expanse of field.

Their escape ship waited, fired and ready to go. It was a glaringly incongruous private yacht, painted in pleasant, unmilitary shades of blue; the name *Starcrossed* was painted in elegant, slanting letters on its side. The ship's avian-like lines had been designed for beauty, not wartime efficiency.

The ship's human captain, Heedon, waiting impatiently outside, looked ready for a jaunty mid-afternoon cruise, not a desperate Rebel escape. His hair was slicked back and plastered tight against his head in a fashion popular with wealthy humans on several of the more financially progressive worlds. Even the smart cut of his tailored jacket and his crisply laundered trousers suggested socialite tendencies.

Neela stepped out of the airspeeder, glanced from Stasheff to the ship and her captain, and opened her mouth in protest.

"Intelligence highly recommends him," Stasheff rapidly explained. "His loyalty is with us, and no one will expect you to escape in something like this."

Neela gave the ship another doubtful look. "You may have to convince *me*, Stasheff. Does it even have shields?"

Before Stasheff could reply, Heedon advanced on them, stridently protesting. "Where have you been! My comm line says the natives are getting unfriendly! For all I know, they've followed you!" If he was awed in the presence of so renowned a Rebel as Neela, he hid it well.

"Escapes don't run on schedule," Stasheff irritably reminded him. Heedon snorted and cast an eye at Neela. "This her? She looks older in person."

Neela's brows ascended sharply.

"If you'd gone through what she has, you'd look old, too," Stasheff answered, then realizing his lack of tact, he turned to the Rebel leader, aghast.

Neela held up a hand. "Never mind. We'd better go. Once we're aboard, you can tell me our destination."

"Do you think you're cutting it close enough?" Heedon sarcastically inquired. "Or do you want to wait just a few more minutes to *really* get the adrenaline going?" He snorted, turned, and marched indignantly up the ramp.

Neela exchanged unhappy glances with her bodyguard.

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As much as he hated to admit it, Heedon was beginning to understand how and why he'd allowed himself to be dragged into the Rebellion.

"Look at me," he muttered, vehemently stabbing coordinates into the computer. "Transporting a person like that! I must be out of my mind!"

But it was false grumbling. His exotic cruise business had once flourished, with aristocrats and socialites as clientele. But since Palpatine's rise to power, the aristocracy had begun to crumble on a galaxy-wide scale; many had become impoverished puppets. They still lived in their pretty houses and gave their pretty parties, but only as far as Palpatine would allow it, and only as it suited his purpose. Their wealth now belonged to the Emperor -- he bought their allegiance and maintained their pampered lifestyles in exchange for their loyalty. Terrified at the thought of losing the only way of life they understood, they'd agreed, almost to a person. Unfortunately, not many of them could afford luxury cruises anymore.

And so, as much as Heedon hated to admit it, this revolution -- this Neela -- was his cause. It didn't make him less resentful that it had to be his cause, but there it was.

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"It's time you told me our destination, Stasheff," Neela thought she'd been admirably patient -- not the easiest thing for a leader of a galaxy-wide Rebellion to be. She was accustomed to quick answers, rapid decisions, and instant solutions.

Within an hour, Stasheff had seen her patience erode into petulance.

"In light of the circumstances, Madame, General Se'lab and Intelligence thought it best that you attempt to go as far out on the Rim as you can," Stasheff explained. "Despite appearances, we have an excellent pilot, and you ..."

Neela raised an eyebrow, her expression indicating that whatever he said next had to go a long way toward meeting her approval.



Stasheff's mouth hung suspended between word and thought. "There's no where else you can safely go," he finally concluded.

She raised the other eyebrow.

"And -- well, Madame, you're too well known on sight on nearly all the worlds from holovids alone, and that being the *obvious* case, your safety is --"

"Secondary to the survival of that base," she answered, not bothering to disguise her irritation. "Stasheff, occasionally I'm astonished by your limited thinking. I left Horob as Se'lab requested. That doesn't mean I've given *up*. *He* should have realized that."

"Madame Neela!" Stasheff exclaimed. "I have my orders!"

"And I have my conscience. I refuse to run another parsec. I won't make a mockery of the Rebel blood that's been shed in this war; too much of that blood was personal."

Stasheff stared in disbelief. "With all respect, Madame, how can you possibly change that?"

"There's a way to turn every trick, Stasheff." She made a knowing expression and turned, beckoning for him to follow as she strode toward the cockpit.

Heedon was sitting at the console, feet up, his lean frame languid in the pilot's seat -- almost indolent, as though he was, indeed, transporting a vacationing tourist instead of an escaped Rebel.

"I've plotted a course for the Rim," he said without looking up or adjusting his posture. "It's going to take us forever to get there, and the next stop is probably oblivion, but what the crock, right?"

"We're not going to the Rim," Neela answered.

Stasheff's face went red with alarm. "Madame, I must protest!"

"Stasheff, *do* stop calling me that," Neela sighed. "It makes me sound old. Neela will do."

Stasheff's tongue staggered over the name, unable to articulate so familiar a sound at so profound a person. He finally stopped trying. "General Se'lab gave me implicit instructions to transport you safely to --"

"I am not subject to the orders of General Se'lab," she smoothly answered. "Nor have I ever been, and since when has the Rim been safe?" She shook her head. "You're much too young to be so rigid, Stasheff. I certainly hope it's something you'll outgrow."

Heedon thrust out a lower lip and nodded in approval.

Stasheff was appalled. "You're an escaped Rebel leader! They'll kill you if they find you!"

"I've been prepared for death since I joined the Rebellion."

Stasheff clamped his jaw shut. Heedon realized he was grinning, admiring her despite himself. "So you're not going to the Rim." He sat forward and asked in a conspiring tone. "What do you have in mind instead?"

Neela took a seat opposite him. "We're going to intercept the Imperial Star Destroyer on its way to Horob and hold them long enough to give our ground troops time to safely evacuate."

Stasheff choked.

Heedon stared at her, waiting for the punchline. When it became obvious that she had said all she meant to, he sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. "Is that all?"

"For the time being."

"You wouldn't, perhaps, care to try for something a little more challenging?"

"Oh, I think this will do to begin with."

Heedon massaged his temples delicately with his fingertips. "You're giving me a headache."

Stasheff finally found his voice. "Madame Neela, you've lost your mind!"

"Very likely," she agreed. "But, Stasheff, didn't you once tell me you were curious to see the inside of an Imperial warship?"

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Heedon stared in dismay at the nav screen where the red scrawl representing an approaching Star Destroyer had just appeared. "There they are," he said, tapping the screen with an index finger. He turned in his seat and fixed Neela with an uncertain eye. "I really like the idea of living, you know? We're small - they probably haven't seen us yet. It's not too late to --"

"Just remember what I told you to do, and you'll still live to be an old man," Neela promised. She took a seat beside him to study the computer.

Stasheff braced a hand on the back of Neela's chair and glanced over her shoulder at the screen. "This is insane."

"Undeniably," Neela agreed. "I never claimed otherwise."

Stasheff was annoyed by her cheerfulness. "Madame, please. They have a ship the size of a small city, stormtroopers, war advisors, officers and heavy duty weapons. What do we have?"

Heedon fixed her with a jaundiced eye. "Don't say we've got 'truth' or I'll get sick."

Neela laughed despite herself. "Truth is the last thing we have in this particular gambit! No, gentlemen, our sabacc card in the hole will be that despite *Starcrossed's* diminutive size, she is still too large to fit into the docking bay of a *Victory-class* Star Destroyer."

Stasheff and Heedon exchanged bewildered expressions, then with a fatalistic sigh and a shrug, Stasheff glanced back at the computer. The red dot on the screen had come to rest in a steady orbit around Horob.

"We need do no more than hold the Imperials long enough for the ground troops to evacuate," Neela reminded them. "Several hours should be sufficient."

"I trust you also have a plan for getting us out alive?" Heedon asked.

"There is *always* a plan," Neela assured him. "Open a line."

Heedon stared hard at her, then transferred his gaze to Stasheff. The young guard licked his lips, hesitated, then nodded.

With a sigh, Heedon turned back to the communications board. "Imperial ship, this is the *Starcrossed*. I'm an independent entrepreneur and captain of this ship. I have a passenger aboard who wants to talk to you."

Neela leaned toward the console "Star Destroyer, this is Sayer Mon Neela of the Rebel Alliance. I order you to surrender your vessel."

The Imperial silence was understandable.

Heedon leaned toward the console. "She really means it," he offered.

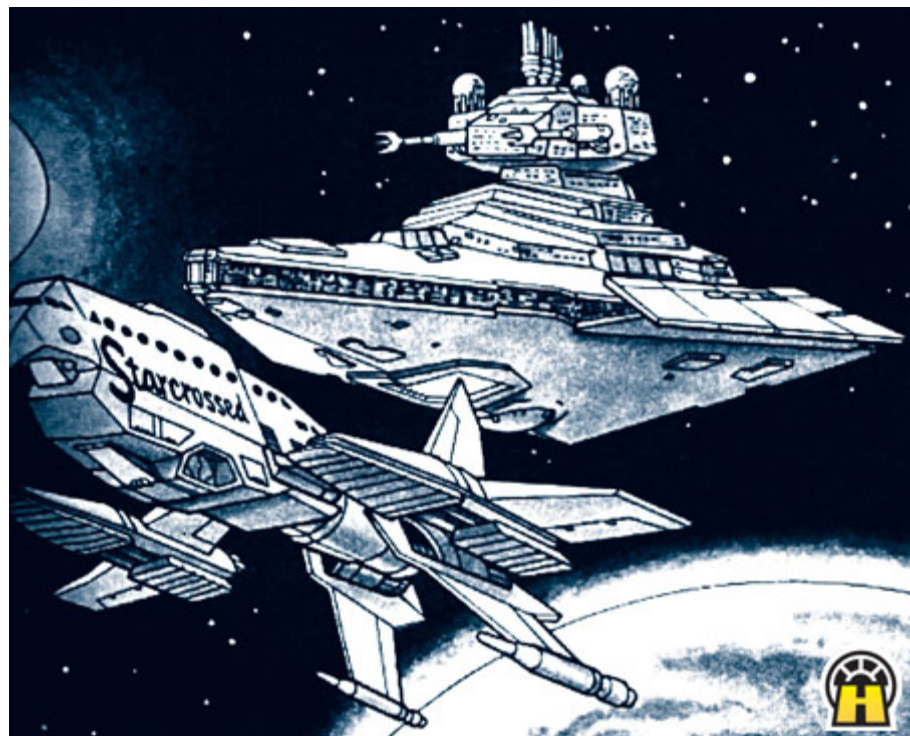
Stasheff put himself in the Imperials' position, wondering how he would have responded to such an outrageous claim.

"Surrender to *you*?" came the final, incredulous reply. "Mon Neela, indeed!"

"You need only bring me aboard to prove it," Neela answered.

"Without any tricks," Heedon added. "I'll be over here, monitoring her the whole time. This ship's rigged to blow at the first sign of trouble. And if *Starcrossed* blows, she could take out a small moon, never mind your puny Star Destroyer."

There was a burst of laughter on the other end. "Am I to understand that you are threatening an Imperial warship?"



"Something like that," Heedon answered. "You willing to take a chance on the threat? The Alliance has got a few tricks you guys still don't know about."

"I doubt it."

"Doubt all you want, but you'll never know 'till you wake up dead. will you?"

There was an audible snort over the comm. "It's not every day we receive such an outrageous threat, and the voluntary surrender of someone on the Imperial extermination list."

"This is not a surrender," Neela answered. "Quite the reverse, sir. You are my prisoner. You may take Captain Heedon at his word when he says the ship is rigged to detonate at the first sign of aggression. I will come aboard to confer. Our ship is obviously too large to fit your docking bay. We require a docking claw and umbilical -- we will enter through the artificial corridor. Furthermore, you will see to it that the umbilical connecting our respective vessels is equipped with blast doors at each entrance to prevent invasion from either side. Take my offer or disregard it, but don't waste my time."

There was a long silence.

"Gentlebeings," Heedon finally said. "Did I mention how impatient we can be?"

The ship shuddered, rocking the deck beneath them. Neela grasped the back of Heedon's chair. "Yes, I know," she said before either Stasheff or Heedon could speak. "Tractor beam."

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Captain Sergus Lanox politely extended a hand as Neela and Stasheff entered the access bay from the umbilical corridor. "Welcome aboard the *Imperial Hazard*, Madame Neela; this is quite an honor."

Sergus was a handsome man in mid-life, with a serious expression and gray eyes that were too large for his face.

Is it only that hideous uniform that makes them all look the same? Neela wondered.

She nodded without taking his hand.

"Captain Sergus Lanox at your service, and delighted to discover that it is you, after all," he continued. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I, like everyone else in the civilized galaxy, recognize your name because of your involvement in the old Imperial Senate." He smiled, bowed, and sardonically raised an eyebrow. "Although I daresay, more know of you now because of your traitorous inclinations. The Emperor will personally reward me for your capture."

"You have yet to capture me," Neela reminded him.

"Ah yes, of course," Sergus smiled. He straightened from his bow. "You've threatened me with your little pleasure boat. I must be careful." He grinned, not unpleasantly.

Neela indicated Stasheff with a gesture. "This is my aide, Raan Stasheff."

Lanox acknowledged the young man with the barest flicker of a gaze, then turned his attentions back to Neela. "Is he essential to our negotiations?"

"I am essential to her safety," Stasheff tightly answered.

Lanox ignored him. "If I understand correctly," he said to Neela, "your ship is your first, best assurance of safety. If that is true, then you won't mind that I have your guard removed to guest quarters or returned to your ship until our meeting is complete."

Stasheff's jaw set like stone. "Not on your--"

"Of course, Captain," Neela interrupted. She laid an encouraging, almost motherly, hand at Stasheff's collar. "I'd have it no other way."

Stasheff snapped her a disbelieving glare. "I'm not leaving this ship without you." He put a hand on the butt of his holstered blaster. The doors snapped open as though the bodyguard's action had activated them, and three stormtroopers entered, rifles drawn.

Lanox smiled wryly at Neela. "You understand that diplomacy can be carried only so far. We'll talk, Madame, but our conference will consist of two, and only two."

Stasheff cast Neela a last angry glance as he was led away.

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For a time Neela sat across a feast-laden table and listened as Lanox extolled the glories of the Empire and sang the praises of Palpatine. She was almost amused; Lanox was spouting Imperial propaganda so freely that one would have thought the conference had been *his* idea. So far, Neela hadn't had an opportunity to present her own proposal.

Finally, when it seemed likely that the Imperial would carry his recitations indefinitely, she interrupted. "I am not a wholehearted admirer of the Empire, sir."

Lanox chuckled. "If you were, I would not be quite so ardent. It's never very enjoyable to preach to the already converted, Madame." He gave a genuine smile, devoid of sarcasm -- perhaps even a bit self-deprecating, Neela thought. He'd embarrassed himself by rambling on about his devotion to the Empire.

Neela was surprised and annoyed by this glimpse into his humanity; she'd grown accustomed to despising anyone in allegiance to Palpatine, particularly officers of the line. She instantly dismissed her next thought that the smile made him look almost handsome.

"I'm beginning to think you don't trust me," Lanox continued. "Considering you claim to hold my life in your hands, I'm surprised." The Imperial's smile expanded into a grin, and she saw it, then -- the mockery in his eyes.

"A military leader of the Rebellion *not* trust the commander of an Imperial warship?" she parried. "Why Captain, now it is *my* turn to be surprised."

Lanox sipped his wine. "It seems rather stupid of the Alliance to allow you to wander so far from their protection. But, I have always said they were fools."

"They had enough wisdom to destroy the Death Star."

"But they do not have enough to maintain their strength. The Rebellion is a bothersome insect to be swatted and destroyed at the Emperor's whim."

"Some insects have a poisonous sting, sir."

For the barest instant she saw admiration in his eyes, but it was quickly masked again by that infuriatingly superior gaze that made all Imperials seem to be glaring down their noses, even if they weren't.

"For your sake, Madame, I do hope whatever negotiations you have in mind meet my approval, or, threats of a suicide protectorate ship notwithstanding, you may find yourself my guest longer than you'd supposed."

"My proposal is quite simple," she answered. "Return with me to a Rebel base and turn yourself, your ship, and your crew over to the Alliance."

He gave her a look of mock disapproval. "With answers like that, you're ensuring captivity." He stood. "I'll send an armed contingent to take control of your little boat."

"The *Starcrossed* is programmed to detonate at the first unfamiliar presence."

"I doubt the Rebels would risk you so casually."

"You said it yourself -- my ship is my best assurance of safety. You haven't destroyed it or taken me hostage, have you?"

"Only because I have chosen not to. I will inform your pilot that you and your aide will be executed unless he cooperates."

Now it was Neela's turn to look disapproving. "My life and the life of my aide are nothing. Obviously, for us to have come this far, there is more at stake than a mere two lives."

Lanox lifted one hand in a show of mock resignation. "Every gambit must be tried." He studied her a moment, thinking it a great pity she'd turned against the Empire. Though he'd never before met her, he'd appreciated her cunning mind for years. Before the war, she'd been well enough known in the Old Republic to be seen on almost every daily holoreport and news broadcast, and it was usually because she'd bested some notable opponent, or somehow got the Senate around to her way of thinking.

She was really quite an attractive woman ... if one were to be attracted to Rebels, which he reminded himself he was not. "It seems we are at stalemate," he sighed. "I'll have you escorted to the detention cell."

"I think not," she answered, "Stasheff and I will return to our ship now and await your decision. Please remember that if it is the wrong one, it will be the last you make. I would be most appreciative if you would have my aide brought to me here, and then you can accompany both of us back to the umbilical corridor."

She watched as his expression alternated between uncertainty and chagrin. Finally, he glanced down at the table and picked up a long-stemmed glass. "Did you find the wine to your liking?"

"I have always appreciated fine Alderaani wine."

"Yes." He took a sip, then smiled at her over the rim of the glass. "What a pity Alderaan will make no more wine. I'll have your aide brought."

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The stormtroopers escorting Neela and Stasheff back through the umbilical corridor were stopped at *Starcrossed's* hatch by Heedon and his drawn blaster rifle. "Far enough," he warned, simultaneously pounding his fist on a raised wall panel. The blast door slammed down, separating Imperials and Rebels on their respective sides.

"Just *what* did you think you were doing letting him separate us like that!" Stasheff exploded, forgetting in his anger that Neela was someone he revered.

Neela gave him a genuine smile. "Why, Stasheff, look at you! You can unbend when you try, can't you?"

Stasheff was in no mood for humor. "Look, *lady*, I was sent by some pretty blasted important people to keep you safe!"

"Well, you're certainly doing a very poor job of it." She took advantage of his momentary outraged stupor to turn to Heedon and say, "I trust you did as I asked while we were away?"

"Of course," Heedon sniffed. "I sent a message to the base on Horob, telling them to come and pick you and your Imperial prisoners up for transport. They're to send their largest ships, or even three or four."

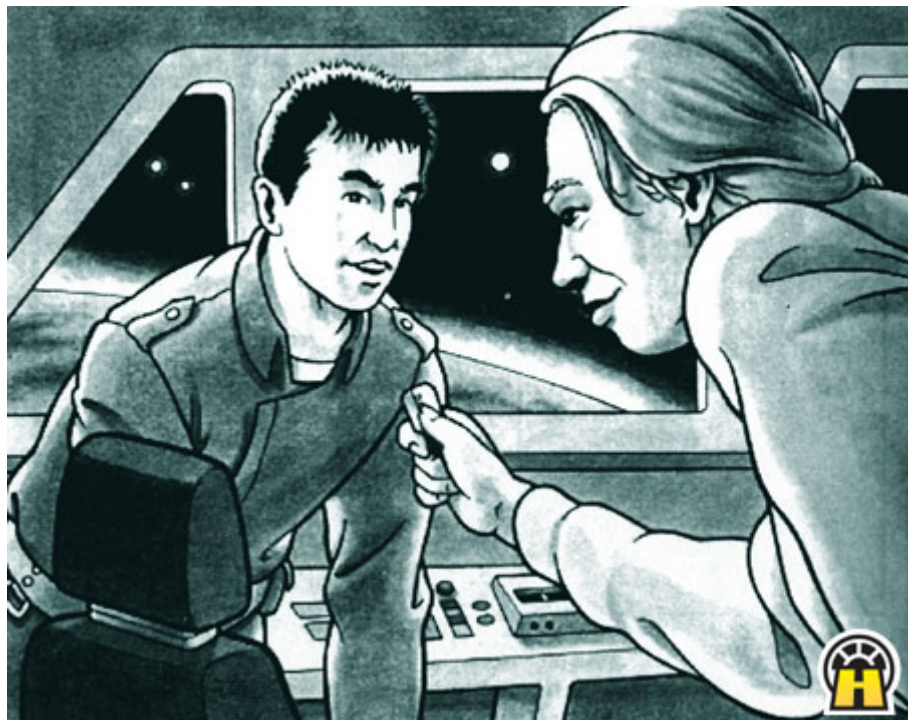
Stasheff was beyond anger; he could barely speak. Instead he steadied himself against a console chair and hissed, "What?" He leaned as far toward her as he could across the seat, his eyes protruding. "Their *largest* ships? If the troops on Horob send a convoy of any size against that Star Destroyer, they'll be wiped out! I thought you were trying to buy those troops time, not murder them yourself!"

"Stasheff, if you please," Neela attempted.

But Stasheff wasn't listening. "We don't have the kind of ships on Horob it takes to fight a *Victory-class* Star Destroyer! At the most we've got a few X-wings! Have your forgotten that Horob is a research base?"

"Stasheff," Neela tried again, more firmly this time. "The base on Horob will never receive the message, because it will be intercepted by the *Imperial Hazard* first, then jammed. This ploy not only reinforces the lie that we are holding them captive, but it gives us more time to plot our own escape."

Stasheff gaped. "And what makes you think Lanox won't call for reinforcements when he intercepts that message?"



"If you were an Imperial Captain commanding a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer," Neela answered, "would you call your superiors and tell them you were being held hostage by a pleasure yacht?"

This boy is too much fun, Neela thought at the confused mix of emotions that flitted across Stasheff's face. She reached across the chair and took hold of his lapel. When he jerked reflexively away, she held between her thumb and forefinger a small datachip she'd taken from beneath his collar. "You didn't know it when I let Lanox take you away," she said, "but I planted this little marvel of Alliance technology beneath your collar; it recorded every detention and security code on your level." She grinned at his look of astonishment and turned the chip between her fingers. "At least I hope it did. I don't really know if it works. This is the prototype of a sensor chip that was being developed on Horob; it's only experimental, and the finished product will undoubtedly be much more sophisticated than this, but we work with what we have." She handed it to Heedon who slipped it into a slot on the comm board. "Because this is a prototype, it uses a simple receiver," she continued.

"You mean you had this planned all along?" Stasheff demanded.

"Not all along," she admitted. "Not until we left Horob."

"You're willing to risk our lives on that flimsy little piece of junk, and you don't even know if it works?"

"Risk, Stasheff," Neela quietly reminded him, "is what war is about. And besides, I wouldn't have missed seeing you forget your manners for all the worlds."

"Well," Heedon said, turning from the console, "prototype or not, what we now have scrolling up on the screen, lady and gentleman, is not only the codes for the detention cells, but all 10 of the tractor beam projectors, too."

Neela looked at Stasheff with a smile. "Thank you, Stasheff; you make a remarkably practical prisoner. Captain Heedori, will you kindly begin?"

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Hazard lurched violently, spilling most of the hot drink Lanox was nursing into his computer. The Captain cursed and jumped to his feet, scowling as the machinery hissed and snapped in protest.

The holographic image of Sayer Mon Neela that Lanox had projected from the small computer wavered with the uncertainty of fouled machinery, but as the overload and protection circuits kicked in, the image once again stabilized.

Lanox pounded his fist on the comm button. "Control, what happened?"

"Sir," an uncertain voice responded, "We've lost a bit of altitude, but it's nothing serious. We're on it, sir."

"*Why* did we lose altitude?" Lanox demanded.

"Checking now, sir."

Lanox irritably closed the channel and resumed his seat, continuing to study Neela's image. Once again he was bothered by distinctly unmilitary impressions of her. She was attractive, there was no denying it. Even in holograph, her beauty -- and yes, her determination and strength of character, as well -- were apparent. How many of her enemies, he wondered, had underestimated her? What an Imperial she'd have made! The Empire did not make it a practice to utilize women in politics or military matters, but there were the extraordinary few -- and Neela was, indeed, extraordinary. What an asset to the glory of the Empire she'd have been! And what a tragedy such a talented, intelligent woman had chosen to waste her skills on the Rebel Alliance.

Lanox transferred his gaze to the list of statistics displayed on the screen. She'd been an assistant barrister general of the Old Republic, and, therefore, one of the highest placed desk-bound law enforcement officials of the previous government. She'd been an active voice in the Senate against Palpatine, as well. Since then she'd become one of the Rebellion's chief war strategists. The computer suggested that her battle plans were responsible for a significant number of Rebel successes.

Lanox turned off the display and sat back, considering his options. Contacting Command for further instructions was out of the question. They would laugh him to scorn, and he would probably be demoted (or worse) for incompetency when he returned. Besides, if he could best Mon Neela where others had failed -- even take her prisoner -- it would be a significant victory.

He realized that once she was in the Empire's hands, her fate would not be pleasant, and that darkened his mood. But he scornfully dismissed the feelings. War was not a pleasant game, but Neela had chosen to play. Any consequences would be her own fault, not his.

His reflections were interrupted by a junior officer, who stood hesitantly in the hatch, awaiting acknowledgement.

"What is it?" Lanox demanded.

"Sir," the young man replied, "I've been sent to inform you that there is a malfunction in the security computers on the detention level."

"What kind of malfunction? Come, man, don't stand there gaping like an imbecile, out with it!"

"The computer codes appear to be confused, sir. They've started a communications loop that the technicians can't stop, and they don't know what's causing it."

"The detention level, you say?"

"Yes, sir. But, it's not confined to that vicinity. The computers throughout the entire ship are showing signs of corruption; already we've lost altitude."

"Are we falling into atmosphere?" Lanox demanded.

"Yes, sir. But the technicians are working on it, and they've told me to inform you that they should have the problem corrected soon."

"Why didn't they tell me this themselves?"

"Sir. They're preoccupied, sir." *That Rebel she-nashtah is responsible for this!* Lanox thought, and found himself irrationally amused at the thought. He had no doubt that his capable technicians would find the difficulty and set it straight. In the meantime, admiring his opponent's ingenuity would do no harm. It would, after all, be one of her last strategies of war before he (somehow) took her prisoner.

* * *

"What do you mean you don't know how to stop it?" Stasheff stood over Heedon's chair, glaring at him with all the intensity of his accumulated frustration.

"Look," Heedon snapped. "I didn't design this blasted chip. All I did was stick it in the computer and tell it to do its job. If it's got more ambitions than that, it's not my fault."

Neela sighed. "You're saying that it's retrieving and sending the information too quickly? That the Imperial computers are going into overload?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Well," she shrugged. "That's not bad. If their computers are confused, they'll still release us from the tractor beams."

"They *would*," Heedon countered, "if they could get the message straight! The problem is that the chip is reading and sending the information back into their computers several hundred times per second! 'Turn off the tractor beam, turn on the tractor beam, turn off the tractor beam' ... like that."

"Oh, that's not good," Neela mused.

Stasheff glared at her. "No kidding."

"Stasheff, you're becoming insubordinate," she reproved. "Can you repair it?" she asked Heedon.

The socialite gave her an incredulous stare. "You don't expect much from a cruise director, do you? If your so-called brilliant Rebel scientists couldn't get the bugs out of this thing, how do you expect me to do it?"

"Of course," Neela answered. "Forgive me. I am accustomed to working with people who know their jobs."

Heedon wasn't sure whether he'd been insulted or commended, but there was no time to dwell on it. "We've got other problems, too."

"What a surprise," Stasheff muttered.

"The Imperial ship is losing altitude, and dragging us with it. We can't turn the tractor beam off, and we can't disengage the umbilical corridor or claw, either, which means if they go splat on that planet below, we go splat, too. And that's not all; that little electronic monstrosity is making our computers loop back on us, as well! The blast door at the umbilical hatch is wide open."

"Well close it!" Stasheff yelled.

"You want to tell me how?" Heedon growled.

"I don't care how, just do it! With that blast door up, we're wide open to Imperial attack!"

"Look, I'll say this once more," Heedon said, as though explaining complex math to a child. "I push buttons, I don't do computers."

"Can we close the door manually?" Neela demanded.

"Can't hurt to try," Heedon shrugged. Neela grasped Stasheff's shoulder and yanked him with her toward the hatch. "Stay here and see if there's anything at all you can do to stop the loop," she called to Heedon over her shoulder, "While Stasheff and I try to make the blast door drop."

Heedon watched them run down the short corridor and round a corner, where they were lost to view. Disgruntled, he turned back to the console. "Didn't I just tell her I don't do computers?" he muttered.

* * *

"Captain Lanox, there's no mistake, sir. The surveillance eye in the umbilical says their blast door is open, and they appear to be trying to close it manually."

Lanox swivelled in his chair to face his officer. "Not so strong as they've led us to believe, then." He tapped his fingers on the edge of his chair. "What is the condition of the ship?"

"We're losing altitude rapidly sir, falling closer to the planet. Engineering also reports that the power loops are creating dangerous overloads. We're in danger of implosion unless we find the originating cause, sir."

"I know the originating cause," Lanox growled. Adrenaline urged him to his feet. "Take an armed contingent of troopers and storm that corridor while their blast door is still up. I don't care about the others, but I want Mon Neela taken alive. She claims that her ship is rigged to detonate at the first illegal entry, so do not -- I repeat, do *not* -- board the ship itself!"

The officer saluted. "Understood! We'll report back via comlink when the capture is complete, sir!"

"No need," Lanox crisply answered. "I'm coming with you."

The officer looked alarmed. "Forgive me, sir, but ... but the situation is extremely dangerous, and we --"

"I intend to personally arrest that woman in the name of the Empire," he answered, then recognized himself as a liar. *She's notorious*, he thought. *She's female, and she's humiliated me. I want to best her, no more and no less.* "It is your responsibility to keep her alive, and me protected," he continued to his officer. "Assemble your troops."

* * *

The blast door obstinately refused to budge.

"We've come too far to be defeated by something as absurd., this!" Neela protested. She clenched her teeth and kicked the door, then pounded it with a closed fist. "Drop, blast you!"

Stasheff grasped her arm. "Madame, this isn't going to work! We've got to have another plan, and we have to find it *now*! It's not going to take them long to realize we're this vulnerable, and when they do--"

An explosion of blaster fire from stormtroopers, still shielding themselves at the sides of *Hazard's* open blast door, interrupted him, impacting on the hull so close to his head that Neela could smell his singed hair.

Stasheff threw himself at Neela, wrapping his arms protectively around her as he launched both of them back into the questionable safety of the ship.

"Let me go, Stasheff!" she demanded: But still he held her. "Stasheff, *get off!*" She pushed hard and he rolled onto his back.

Neela gasped. Stasheff's tunic was saturated with blood; his eyes held a pained, dazed look she'd seen too often in the eyes of wounded soldiers. "I'm sorry, Madame," he rasped.

Neela had no time for comforts. She snatched the blaster pistol from his fingers and positioned herself at the side of the open hatch.

The whiteshells were still positioned at either side of the blast door; she saw a flash of gray uniform behind them and recognized Lanox.

"Advance!" The Imperial Captain roared. "Don't stand here protecting yourselves like children!" Impulsively, he pushed past them into the corridor, waving them forward.

He was a perfect target, and Neela had him perfectly in her sights. But in the hairbreadth's time it would have taken her to squeeze the trigger, she spared his life.

The instant following left no time for regrets. An explosion fired *Hazard* from within, rocking with violent force both ships and the unstable umbilical.

Lanox was thrown off his feet and hurled headlong even as *Hazard's* blast doors thundered shut behind him, separating him from his troopers.

A second, immediate explosion made the Star Destroyer lurch and plunge like a wounded bird. Lanox careened off a far wall and fell, gracelessly sliding the length of the corridor into Neela at the opposite end.

They went down together in a tangle of arms and legs. Unable to regain balance, they clung to one another, eyes wide with horror as the corridor rocked and swayed, threatening to collapse with each new explosion.

After what seemed an eternity, the convulsions and noise stopped, the corridor ceased its wild vibrations and settled into a deceptively gentle sway. Ahead -- still confused by the erratic commands of the computer -- *Starcrossed's* blast door slid quietly shut, while behind, *Hazard's* snapped open.

For a dazed moment, Neela and Lanox gaped at one another, then Lanox shot to his feet and threw her off, bolting toward his ship as quickly as his legs would carry him.

Neela turned and threw herself onto her knees in front of *Starcrossed's* closed portal, squeezing her fingers between the tightly sealed cracks as she tried against all hope to make it open.

The hiss of atmosphere escaping through cracks in the corridor's inner bulkhead taunted her.

"Open!" she demanded of the door from between clenched teeth. Lanox lurched onto the landing ledge of his ship, gasping for breath, bending at the waist to brace his hands on his knees. Around him, emergency klaxons blared, his crew scrambled and screamed to one another as they fought to save their dying vessel.

But through the overwhelming confusion and noise, it was the sound of Neela at the end of the corridor, cursing the blast door, the Empire, and his own name, that caught all of Lanox's attention.

He straightened, turned, and saw her on her knees, still struggling to open the door to her ship before the inner bulkhead breached. *This is your chance, fool!* he thought. *You should have taken her when you had the opportunity! Capture her now, take her back to the Emperor, and redeem yourself from this debacle. But can I? The bulkhead in that corridor will blow at any moment!* He squared his shoulders and gathered what remained of his courage. *Better to take the chance and die here, than to return to the Emperor, defeated by this Rebel. His Majesty's punishment would be far worse.*

Cautiously, he stepped back into the corridor, edged his way along one creaking wall, and stepped up beside Neela, laying a firm hand on her shoulder.

She glanced sharply up, all fear evaporated from her face. Only anger and resentment remained, as though she had resigned herself to her destiny, but would not give fate the satisfaction of her fear.

Conflict and inexplicable guilt roiled in Lanox's chest as he stared down at her -- long-time admiration of her battling with his loyalty to the Empire. He was humiliated to realize that, enemy or not, she had more courage than he would ever have.

Before he realized his own changed intentions or even fully knew what he was doing, he was on his knees beside her, forcing his fingers into the cracks of the door, grimacing with the effort to force it open.

Neela glared. "Why are you helping me?"

"Madame," he grunted, pausing only long enough to glare back. "With all due respect, this is hardly the time for questions. This is *your* escape. Would you care to assist me?"

Under the strength of their combined efforts, the door catch finally gave way and it flew open with a forceful *snap!*

Lanox shot to his feet, dragging Neela with him. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her toward him for a full, generous kiss. "My payment," he explained, then he spun the flabbergasted Rebel forward and thrust her through the hatch into the safety of her ship.

The corridor gave another dramatic groan and a corner of the bulkhead ripped violently apart. The sudden decompression sucked the duty cap off Lanox's head and out the aperture, swirling his hair, whipping his uniform tunic.

Neela clutched a strut in *Starcrossed's* hatch with one hand, while reaching out to him with the other. "Here!" she cried.

Lanox gave her a despairing glance but turned instead and fought his way down the rapidly deteriorating corridor toward his own ship. Neela watched in horror, unable to look away, as he pushed himself resolutely forward.



More than once he fell and crawled forward on his belly, his hands clawing the deck for some meager purchase against the suction of the rapidly depressurizing corridor. Then somehow, miraculously, he was at *Hazard's* blast door. He struggled to his feet, grasped the edges of the hatch with white knuckled hands, and hauled himself into his ship.

It was the last Neela saw of him before *Hazard's* blast door slammed down, closing him from view.

Only then did Neela turn and run back towards the cockpit of her own ship.

Heedon, white-faced and shaken, was at the helm, with Stasheff barely conscious, in a low-slung chair behind him.

"We're free of the claw and the tractor beam!" Heedon cried. "The computers have returned control!"

"Back into space then, man, and make the jump as soon as you can!" Neela cried.

As Heedon obeyed and they were finally soaring back toward the safety of the stars, Neela glanced desperately out the port.

Hazard had somehow stabilized; she no longer appeared to be in danger of crashing, but still she listed helplessly. To all appearances, the Star Destroyer was dead.

Starcrossed reached point and streaked into lightspeed.

* * *

"It may sound treasonous, but I have a grudging admiration for that Imperial," Neela admitted. She walked beside Se'lab on the grounds of the Rebel base on Carosi XII. The citation that she -- along with Heedon, and the recovering Stasheff -- had only just received for saving the base on Horob, was clutched in her hand. "He believes as fervently in the Empire as I despise it," she continued. "Yet he risked his life to save an enemy who almost destroyed him. If our roles were reversed, I doubt I'd have done the same."

"Before you become too sentimental over the enemy, remind yourself of the lives he's *destroyed*," the Bothan reminded her. He stopped walking, forcing her to do the same, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Don't let others hear you talk this way, they may not be as understanding as I am."

Neela grimaced. "Se'lab, please understand. It's not that I approve of Lanox, I merely..." she sighed, thought a moment, then gave a resigned shrug. "He saved my life. If he survived the explosions aboard the *Hazard*, I can't help wondering if the Empire will deal harshly with him for losing his ship to the likes of us. I pity *anyone* who falls into Palpatine's hands."

Se'lab shook his head. "One less Imperial is no tragedy. Come now, or you'll miss your own celebration."

When Neela entered the mess hall, a cheer went up. She accepted a hearty round of congratulations, then spotted Stasheff and Heedon at a corner table, surrounded by what appeared to be their own enthusiastic fan club.

Stasheff, his right arm and shoulder encased in a bacta cast, gave her a reproving smile as she joined them.

The crowd politely dispersed, giving the three champions of Horob time to themselves.

"I never thought of myself as a hero before," Heedon mused. He raised his glass in the direction of the departing revelers, "but they say I am, so who am I to argue?"

Neela laughed, nodded, and turned her attentions to her bodyguard. "I can't say the cast becomes you, Stasheff. I do hope you'll be wearing something a little more fashionable in the near future."

"That depends upon you," he answered.

"Ah," she smiled. "Then you've decided to stay on as my bodyguard?"

"Only if you confine all your bluffs to sabacc, ma'am."

"No promises," she smiled, then leaned confidentially toward him. "Actually, Stasheff, you're really quite handsome with your shirt off."

He blushed.

"Speaking of bluffs," Heedon interjected. "You missed the news that just came over the net." He tapped the table and a holoprojector elevated through the middle. "But we saved it for you."

"What ...?" Neela began.

"Just watch," Heedon ordered.

There was a momentary blur of static, a crackle of noise, then the holographic image of Sergus Lanox appeared on a grand spectator stage, with the renowned Imperial Grand Admiral Takel, himself, standing opposite him.

"Why, he's receiving a citation!" Neela yelped.

Takel placed the ribbon around Lanox's neck. "For extreme heroism, and for not relinquishing your ship, even when faced with the latest and most heinous example of Rebel terrorism since the destruction of Alderaan," Takel was saying, "I present you with this, the Distinguished Medal of Imperial Honor."

There was applause from an unseen audience.

"What do you think of that!" Stasheff exclaimed.

Neela flicked the holoprojector off and settled back in her chair. "I think," she answered, "that we may not have seen the last of Sergus Lanox after all." She raised her mug in salute. "To improbable victories, gentlemen."

And she drained her glass.